

ABC of Early Buddhist Teachings

Lecture 1. 02-01-2000

Bhikkhu Dhammavihari

Greetings to all of you on the dawn of the new millennium. No matter to whom the millennium is specially significant, religiously or otherwise. The zero, from where you count it, I do not question as to who placed it there. It is only a convenient starting point, time-wise or space-wise. Thereafter, smaller units within it like centuries and millennia, are convenient units of reckoning. Several thousands of years before that zero, many high level civilizations have existed in the world. Let us be modest enough and be less arrogant to admit this. A glow of light from above should not be allowed to blind us to this unassailable fact of history. Failure to do so, would indeed lower the level of our intellectual honesty and our cultural achievement, whether it comes from the east or the west.

By appropriation or misappropriation, the new millennium shall not be a provocation for aggressiveness, conquest or worldwide conversion. It was seen happening every where. To err on this, in the name of religion, ethnicity or political ideology, would undoubtedly raise the issue of sanity of judgement. Do any one of us wish to be declared insane? The second millennium, or more specifically the twentieth century, provides ample evidence of this malaise. It is in order to gain a little more clarity with regard to this menacing virus of the tendency towards supremacist fanaticism, raising its ugly head once again both in the east and the west, that we thought of initiating this series of lectures.

We call this lecture series, the ABC of Early Buddhist Teachings. It is Buddhist because it is our area of special study. For the little we know of it, we have worked hard in the field. We next add the word **early** to our title for two distinct reasons. In the vast complex of Buddhism, the time factor has played a very big role in generating diverse strands of Buddhist thinking, and therefore of

schools of Buddhist practice, sometimes polarized one in relation to the others. This is what brought about, in the world of yesterday, different systems like the Theravāda, Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna. Today, with a very vibrant wave of new thinking, we are getting very close to one another, obliterating differences where possible.

We also speak of early Buddhism of the Theravāda itself, in terms of its own inner stratification of the classical canonical texts dating back to the time of the Buddha himself, as against the development of an explanatory commentarial tradition, sometimes in later years, but at times possibly contemporary with the Master himself. These two streams of Buddhism, although born of the same stock, show at times somewhat bewildering differences. We feel and sense a richer flavor in what we identify as the canonical early teachings. And feel much more at home with them. The latter, we justifiably feel, has been watered down and made much thinner, to meet contemporary demands of varying times and places. Be that what it may, we shall invariably detect such changes as we go by.

Buddhism is a vast store of knowledge and learning. Our life time, particularly what is left of me, is far too little to attempt to offer you a comprehensive study of Buddhism in detail. Hence the prefatory warning in the title as ABC. We shall pick up the salient points, without a proper study of which it would be difficult for one who claims to follow the path to gain entrance to it. And also for those who wish to study it as outsiders, to make a justifiable assessment of it. In the world today, both these positions are absolutely essential and indispensable. Hence let us commence this series with an openness of mind and a sincerity of purpose.

Hundreds, nay thousands, of years before the commencement of the present reckoning of this millennium as the third, perhaps even anterior to the genesis of Buddhist thinking, there was in the Indian mind a constant prayer which reads as follows :

Asato maṃ sat gamaya tamaso maṃ jyotir gamaya mṛtyor maṃ amṛtaṃ

gamaya.

` From the unreal to the real do thou guide me, from darkness to light do thou guide me, from death to deathless do thou guide me.'

To us, this is a real yearning for a world beyond us, a possible plane of existence which man must seek to discover and attain. That the latter half of the twentieth century conquered outer space and even mastered the art of sending unmanned spaceships to far distant planets like Saturn, is flattering enough. Neil Armstrong is said to have made history by making a successful landing on the moon and from there, talking to us here on earth on the telephone. Even the truth of this is being questioned from time to time.

But let the world know, particularly today's world of science and technology, that the Indian mind had made greater advances even in more fundamental areas which today make more sense to human development as a whole.

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Lecture 2. 16-01-2000

Bhikkhu Dhammavihari

Today let us begin the second lecture in our series with the Buddha aspirant's, i.e. the Bodhisatta's quest for a way of release or *nissarana* from what he had already apprehended as the **painful predicament of the human progeny**. In his own words, he referred to it as *kicchaṃ vatā ' yaṃ loko āpanno* [= this world is plunged in a state of stress, strain and pain]. We have already discussed in our first lecture that the Bodhisatta's sensitivity to this is not the result of divine inspiration or heavenly construction. It is essentially human. It is for this reason that it is invariably within the reach of every human, man and woman,

irrespective of gender. This release comes to every human with the acquisition of enlightenment or *bodhi*. It is also equated to what is commonly referred to as wisdom or *paññā*. With a maturity of human wisdom, which the Bodhisatta had perhaps acquired through continuous cultivation during his *samsāric* sojourning, he felt, with a sharper keenness, an awareness of what we now conveniently call *dukkha*.

It is in this frame of sharp and keenly developed mind that we like to meet our young Bodhisatta, well before his enlightenment. It is this awareness of *dukkha* in human life, in the very natural processes of birth, decay, disease and death which led him to search for a release therefrom. It is the first prompting in this direction which drove him to renounce the household life, leaving behind all that was near and dear to him. This indeed is the goal of *pabbajjā*, i.e. going forth, renouncing one's stand in life. It is for getting beyond all *dukkha* or *sabba-dukkha-nissaraṇa*, that one leaves behind the life of the household.

It is also important for all Buddhists to realize that *dukkha* consists not only of the physical declines of the human body, of decay, disease and death. But also of a whole range of mental or psychic disturbances in success and failure, victory and defeat, blissful union and painful separation etc. etc. Does it make it any better if I quote to you the originals of these in Pali. They run as *piyehi vippayogo dukkho appiyehi sampayogo dukkho yam' pi' cchaṃ na labhati tam ' pi dukkhaṃ*. We run through these vicissitudes of life all the time, and in such situations we take devastating un-Buddhistic decisions, without even batting an eye-lid. Quite often, we are clever enough even to defend what we do, ignoring the very fact of our being Buddhists.

Let us also remind ourselves at this juncture that the Buddha, in his presentation of his new teachings to the world, declared this concept of *dukkha* as the first of his newly discovered Four Truths or *cattāri ariya-saccāni*. Looking at this more historically, we discover the Buddha himself declaring in the Alagaddūpama Sutta that his main mission in life consists of **making known to**

the world the two basic truths of *dukkha* and *nirodha*, i.e. its termination or cessation : *Pubbe c ' āhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ ceva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ* [MN.I.140]. From this basic position of two realities, it did not, time-wise, take long for the evolution of the Four Truths out of this.

With a deeply implanted sense of **causal genesis** or *idappaccayatā paṭicca-samuppādo*, the Bodhistta looks upon all phenomena as having a dependent origination. If unsatisfactoriness in life or *dukkha* which he has already discovered is a reality, wherein then lies its genesis, he asks. It is this first search for the cause of *dukkha* which brings out the truth of origin or *samudaya* which incidentally turns out to be No. 3 [number three] in the series. It is nothing other than the thirsting or the craving for the gratification of sensory desires, in responding to sensory stimuli which the world keeps hurling at humans all the time. This process is called *taṇhā*. It is this *taṇhā* or craving, operating or making demands on this psycho-physical component of the five-fold aggregates called the *pañca-kkhandha* of which the humans are made, which generates the *samsāric* life-generating factors called the *pañca-upādāna-kkhandhā*. That is why it is said *taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ* and *upādāna-paccayā bhavo*. It is the prevalence and the play of these Five Aggregates of Grasping or *pañca-upādāna-kkhandhā* which manifests itself in the form of selfhood or *sakkāya* [See MN.I. 299 wherein it is said *Pañca kho ime āvuso Visākha upādānakkhandhā sakkāyo vutto*]. It is no more than the phenomenon of a sentient being's establishing a relationship with the external world in which he finds himself. It is just a series of activity. Such an erroneous and unacceptable belief in a self or *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi* has to be got rid of by everybody to qualify oneself for entry into the Buddhist path to salvation at *sotāpatti*. This in fact is the first of the three failings which one eliminates at this stage.

*Sahāv ' ssa dassanasampadāya tay ' ssu dhammā jahitā bhavanti
sakkāyadīṭṭhi vicikicchitañ ca sīlabbataṃ vā ' pi yadatthi kiñ ci.*

Let me tell you at this stage that the concept of **sotāpatti** deserves a little more attention than it gets from us at the moment. As far as the word goes, it means **entry into the stream**, stream here meaning the waterway leading to the ocean of Nirvana. By no means does it mean `that which has fallen into one's ears.' Or `that which one has heard.'

Now we go back to our main theme of the day, namely the Four Noble Truths, and to **dukkha** in particular. For those who wish to make a study of Buddhism with a desirable degree of seriousness, we suggest that we begin with the Buddha's own observation about the three categories in which he places these truths. There exist these truths as realities in the world. Therefore they are primarily truths or **sacca**. In Buddhism as a religion, **there has to be a must** in that these truths have **to be actualized or personally apprehended in our own lives**. Not merely exist in the world outside. Therefore they are called **kicca** or **things to be done**. It is in the actualizing of these that we achieve our religious goal. Then they are called **kata** or accomplished, i.e. they become personal achievements in our own lives.

At this stage, it is interesting to go back to the life of the Buddha himself. On his return to his former colleagues or **Pañca-vaggiya bhikkhus** after his enlightenment, he found them expressing doubt as to his spiritual attainments. The only challenge he put back to them was that he never called himself the Fully Enlightened One or **Sammā-sambuddha** until he had gone through the complete process of perfecting in his own life the Four Truths in terms of the threefold development of **ti-parivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ** as referred to above. Then only was his wisdom truly referred to as **totally perfected: ñānadassanaṃ suvisuddham ahosi**.

Knowing that there is a truth called **dukkha** is not enough in itself. It had to be pursued and seen face to face and realized in one's own life. It had to be totally known or **pariññeyyaṃ**. One had to keep doing it until it was finally accomplished.

And this achievement of comprehending the truth of *dukkha* is called *pariññātaṃ*. This same rule applied with regard to the other three truths as well.

In the second truth where craving is declared to be the cause of suffering, then it is insisted that craving or *taṇhā* should be abandoned and got rid of : *pahātabbaṃ*. This is the second stage called *kicca* or essential doing or actualizing of the truth. When it is accomplished, the Bodhisatta tells us that he is fully aware that it has been done and that craving has been totally abandoned : *pahīnaṃ*.

In the third of the truths which is the termination of *dukkha* and is referred to as *nirodha*, one has to strive for its realization : *sacchikātabbam*. Are we really serious about making an end of suffering, no matter what from it takes in our lives? One cannot be half-hearted about it, fooled by soft options like birth in heavenly worlds or positions like being Cakkavatti kings, for the mere putting of a stitch in a *Kathina* robe at the end of the *Vas Pinkama*. We know who rushes for this kind of offers. Are these inducements not like carrots before horses.

Please do not misunderstand us here. We are by no means underrating the significance of the *Vassāna* of the Buddhists, neither for the monks nor for the laymen. For the monks, it has to be a season of additional spiritual growth as the statement *visuddhatthā pavāraṇā* unmistakably implies. For the laymen and laywomen, it must be a season of additional religious activity, both for learning the Dhamma and for improving the spiritual quality of their lives. There are today many lovely Buddhist activities these people can do for their own spiritual uplift and for the good of the society in which they live. One has to admit that somebody has infected Buddhism somewhere. I dare say that the twenty-first century is late enough for a serious and total clean up.

Let us now focus our attention on the last of the Four Noble Truths. It is admittedly the most vital of all the four. But it is inseparably connected with the other three which preceded. The four seem very much interconnected. This

fourth is the *magga sacca* or the truth dealing with the way leading to Nirvana. It is identified as the Noble Eight fold Path referred to in Pali as the *Ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo*. The realization of Nirvana implies both an accurate understanding and a thorough actualization of these in one's life. This is a subject we need to handle with utmost care.

ABC of Early Buddhist Teachings

Lecture 3. 06-02-2000

Bhikkhu Dhammavihari

Proceeding with the ABC of early Buddhist teachings, we have so far discussed the historical beginnings of the founder, Buddha Siddhartha Gautama to whom we shall refer hereafter, from time to time, as Shakyamuni. We have also very clearly indicated, and that in no uncertain terms, that his message to the world as a religion comes as a direct outcome of his own personal discovery through personal experience. In his own words, it is *sayam abhiññā* [= with his own knowledge, with his own discover], *sacchikatvā* [= having realized] *pavedeti* [= makes known]. He was not delivering or transmitting to us humans a divine message from heaven.

Today, we are at the third lecture. I presume that by now you have come to realize that we could not have done better than by starting this series of lectures with the Buddha's promulgation of the Four Noble Truths. They offer such wonderfully new ideas. In the new millennium, it is very essential that we become aware of these new outlooks and new expeditious approaches. Even with regard to the handling of one's religion, Buddhism requires no fear of or subordination to an external divine or heavenly power. The message of the Four Noble Truths is where Buddhism begins. This is the *dhamma* which the Buddha preaches to the

world. *So dhammaṃ deseti ādikalyāṇaṃ* etc. It is so in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta [SN. & Vin.] To us it is like gathering a harvest from seeds freshly sown in one's garden. It is garden fresh. Let us pick up this Dharma before being processed and canned and delivered after packaging.

The first three truths of *Dukkha Samudaya* and *Nirodha* with which we have dealt so far serve as the necessary preamble which gets us on to the Buddhist path of action. Being schooled in the *dhamma*, we believe, is a basic requirement for every Buddhist. The *dhamma* has to be learnt and lived. Its learning is not to be mistaken as an elitist privilege, publicizing the place where one learnt it or the person who taught it. None of us can afford to skip the phase of learning the dhamma. This requirement is referred to as *ariyadhammassa kovido*, i.e. one who has mastered the dhamma. We shall never pilot our course to Nirvana without it. This is also referred to as inheriting the scriptural tradition : *dhamma-dāyāda*. In other words, we come to be fully involved with the *dhamma*, gaining mastery in it. This aspect of *dhamma* inheritance or gaining access to, we call *pariyatti sāsana*.

We have already dealt with the first three truths briefly. But adequately enough, we believe. Today we propose to undertake a detailed study of the fourth truth, namely the *magga*. It is the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* or the eight-fold way leading to *nirodha* or *nibbāna*. In the Buddha's own words, the main attribute associated with it is that 'as the way, it is to be developed' : *bhāvetabbo*. This *magga* is referred to as the *sekha-paṭipadā* or 'the learner's way' [Mahācattārisaka Sutta at MN.III.76]

This subject of the Noble Eightfold Path is an excellent topic for study by all Buddhists, anywhere and everywhere. Whichever way one attempts to assess it, we insist that it is the one and only way for the attainment of Nirvana. It is our belief that it has to be of special interest to Sri Lankan Buddhists. We seriously suspect that in Sri Lanka, over the years, many incorrect ideas have crept into this subject. We shall endeavor to study them one by one. As a way or *magga*, it

has essentially a time-space concept of connecting two points which stand apart at two ends. This is nothing but a logical assumption. The two ends invariably are the *lokiya* or the worldly where we humans find ourselves in and the *lokuttara* or the transcendental state or stage which we aspire to reach. The worldly being or the *sekha* has to go along this way or the *paṭipadā* for the attainment of his transcendental goal on being an *arahant*. The Mahācattārīsaka Sutta beautifully presents this as *Iti kho bhikkhave aṭṭhaṅga-samannāgato sekho paṭipado dasaṅgasamannāgato arahā hoti* [MN.III. 76].

Viewed from this angle, it is immediately implied that a Buddhist aspirant to the goal of *nibbāna* has to start at a specific initial point on the path and proceed gradually therefrom, gaining an ascent all the time. It is all along a reassuring and an elevating and exalting process, sometimes in single units like *sammādiṭṭhi* and at others in clusters like *sammā vācā kammanto ājīvo*. Even with regard to these three of word, deed and livelihood, the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta presents them as the latter ones deriving from the former : *sammāvācassa sammā kammanto pahoti* and so on.

We totally disagree that the journeying on the Eightfold Path is circular in movement. That starting anywhere, one gets back to the others. There is not even a mistaken return to the point of start. Suttas repeatedly insist that the journeying starts with '**corrected vision**' or *sammādiṭṭhi*. They insist all the time on *sammādiṭṭhi pubbaṅgamā* or that *sammādiṭṭhi* should lead the way. The flavour of *sammādiṭṭhi* would thereafter undoubtedly continue to be there all the time. We would almost say it is indispensably and permanently acquired. We would further say that both *sammādiṭṭhi* and *sammā saṅkappa* provide the paving stones, as it were, for the later edifice of *paññā* of the threefold culture of *tisso sikkhā* [See MN.I. 301 where it is said thus by Bhikkhuṇī Dhammadinnā : *yā ca sammādiṭṭhi yo ca sammā saṅkappo ime dhammā paññākkhandhe saṅgahitā*]. We must boldly assert here that *paññā* of the threefold culture of *tisso sikkhā* stands well outside the Eight-fold Way. *Paññā* comes as No.9 after *sammā samādhi*.

** One cannot over emphasize the importance of *sammā saṅkappa* as the second item in the Eightfold Way in the build up of the basic Buddhist outlook and attitude. It is essentially the basic adjustment to the world we live in, attitude wise and action wise. Not holding too hard to the pursuit of pleasure [or *kāma-saṅkappa*] *nekkhamma* is the first requirement of *sammā saṅkappa*. It is the relaxed relationship or dignified detachment to persons or things of the world and the willingness to 'let go'. We would relate this conceptually to *ādāna-paṭinissaga* = letting go what we hold on to. Does this also not approximate to *vineyya loke abhijjhā-domanassaṃ* = restraining our excessive desire and displeasure in relation to the world, categorically referred to in the development of the *Satipaṭṭhānas* ?

** We also subscribe to the view that no one can be a Buddhist in the true spirit of the religion, unless one begins with the readiness to correct one's viciousness towards all things that live in the world. This consists of the two basic concepts of 1. possible conflict with or *vyāpāda* and its follow up in 2. readiness to injure or *vihimsā*.

It is our firm belief that in Buddhism, even the choice of good moral living, i.e. the pursuit of the path of *sīla*, has to be based on a degree of conviction, resulting from a basic awareness of the contents of our religion. For this reason, we strongly affirm that those who take *tisaraṇa paṇṣil* as Buddhists must have in themselves a reasonable degree of *sammā-ditṭhi* or corrected vision with regard to the value system of their own religion. In the absence of our own value scales, is there anything that persuades us to be morally good? See how the Venerable Sāriputta himself in the *Sammāditṭhi Sutta* [at MN.I. 46] explains *sammāditṭhi* as 'A Buddhist disciple or *ariya-sāvaka* knows what is unwholesome [*akusalaṃ*] and knows the genesis of what is unwholesome, knows what is wholesome [*kusalaṃ*] and knows the genesis of what is wholesome etc.'

It is due to the absence of *sammāditṭhi*, we feel, that the acceptance of *sīla*

by the lay community in this country, whether it be the five or the eight precepts, particularly the latter, very often ends up by being not very different from water on a duck's back. Consequently **now they have a new brand of emasculated eight precepts** which they believe they are entitled to observe during a shorter period of half-day, without going through their real testing period of the night. The textual Buddhist tradition as enjoined by the Buddha himself envisages both the day and the night as *imañ ca divasaṃ iamñ ca rattim* for the observance of the *aṭṭhaṅga-sīla uposatha*.

I do hope that all of you understand what I mean when I say **testing period of the night**. All three additional precepts of 6, 7 and 8 of the *aṭṭhaṅga-sīla uposatha* clearly relate to night activities, of dinners, musical entertainment and bodily make-up for social gatherings and bed-time comforts of sleeping. Forget not also the revised version of the third precept of *kāmesu micchācārā*, changed to one of total celibacy on the night of the Uposatha day. Abandoning the eight precepts by sunset can possibly smuggle an indiscreet man or woman into wildly forbidden areas which they have seriously or frivolously promised at the commencement of the day to avoid.

What I endeavoured so far to make clear in these remarks is **the need of a meaningful philosophy of life** in order to regulate human life and make it meaningful in terms of society and the individual. We firmly believe that this is what *sammādiṭṭhi* and *sammā saṅkappa* of the Noble Eightfold Path stand for. Thereafter, **the morality that is needed for good living in the world** is effortlessly provided. It is further evident that those who strictly observe morality with regard to one's thought, word and deed could not slip into the blunder of making a living by erratic and inhuman ways. These include the sale of humans, sale of animals for flesh, sale of alcohol and poison and sale of fire arms. Refraining from these with a humane sensitivity is what brings about *sammā ājīva* or correct livelihood as the 5th item of the Eightfold Way.

Herein behold the upward growth of the human, from stage to stage. By now

the Buddhist way to liberation of the Eightfold Way has elevated the common worldling or the average *puthujjana* from his *lokiya* rusticity very much in the direction of his transcendental ascent. He begins to see more precisely the right from the wrong : *akusala* as distinct from *kusala*. Also develops a capacity to reject the wrong and accept what is right: *akusalaṃ pajahati kusalaṃ bhāveti*. And this is what exactly happens at stage 6 of the Eightfold Way. This is right endeavour or *sammā vāyāma*. One gets groomed in stages to develop and practise it. Can a Buddhist be ever persuaded to rear pigs and poultry to feed his dependents, his wife and children or his aged parents. For him, it is a descent to bestiality. It is only those who hold the view that animals were created for rearing, killing and eating could propagate such an idea. Such thinkers have to be a vanishing species in the world today. They know they have sowed wild oats. Even those who originally preached such ideas do not preach them any more. There are very strong waves of revisionism among them. This is world wide.